THE UNITYO F MAN John 17 Wednesday, April 14, 1965

We are here this evening to prepare ourselves for the celebration of Holy Communion. To do so in this manner is an old, old Christian custom and a particular custom of the Presbyterians. In recent years it has fallen from grace, so to speak. In restructuring the corporate worship of the Church, it has been the studied opinion of most men that the Preparatory service is superfluous; that Communion should be celebrated regularly, and that no special preparation is necessary. I concur, and yet in Holy Week, prior to the observance of Maundy Thursday, I think it highly appropriate to prepare--through the discipline of worship.

Originally those who attended Preparatory services were the only ones allowed to participate in the Sacrament. You are familiar with the Communion tokens used in conjunction with World-Wide Communion. One function of these tokens was as a ticket to Communion. Given out at the Preparatory service, they would then be presented at the service, ~~kmaxxwaxxkx~~ of communion and the worshipper would be allowed to commune. Obviously this wouldn't work here--nor is this what I have in mind. But it is my hope that this service will prepare us--and that our experience together this evening will make tomorrow evening's Communion more meaningful.

Our purpose so defined, I have chosen for my text--our Lord's Prayer at the conclusion of the Last Supper, as recorded in the 17th chapt. of the Gospel according to John. There are only a few occasions in the scriptural accounts where we are given the opportunity of reading the content of Jesus' prayers. The most famous of all--the Lord's Prayer--of course is not a prayer, at all, but a pattern

almost entirely dependent on what the world saw when it looked at the Christians. It wasn't so much what they said, or who they were--but the new and different relationship with each other that convinced others of the truth of their faith. An ancient said "See how they loveone another" and it was this love--and the unity that grew from it, so absent in all of history, that drew the world to the Church. Something new had happened--for here was a community of people acting as no other community of people had acted before.

And yet the early Christians did not come by this naturally. They were of the same stock as all of us, with the same tendencies toward disunity and divisiveness. In fact, early Christianity had to immediately break out of the old pattern of Judaism--a religion totally confined to one nation. This was the Church's first crisis. Nearly all of the 1st Christians were Jews, accostomed to considering all Gentiles unclean. Totally emersed in their own history, cultus and culture, it seemed only natural to them that to become a Christian, a convert ought to first become a Jew. Within this context it was impossible to talk about true unity with anyone but a fellow Jew. It was St. Paul who seized this issue, and fought it out with Peter and James. Paul saw the Gospel as the message of redemption for all men--and it didn't matter if a man was a Jew or a Greek, a slave or a free man--Jesus Christ died for him--and Christianit y brought him into a new community of fellow believers. Christian unity became possible because Paul won the struggle. The Church did not become a narrowly defined, racially and culturally based institution because Paul alone realized that all men were meant to participate in the new brotherhood.

This is still a very live issue for us. What is evil--how can we avoid it when we define it? How can we live normal lives in the world God has given us and be faithful Christians. We have our contemporary Puritans, who would actually leave the world by adovcating a totally negativistic approach to life.

But here, in this prayer for the disciples, we read again that the Christian, of any age, is to be totally in the world, living out his faith out there where decisions are made, where men encounter men in offices, stores, schools and neighborhoods. Christianity is a life--affirming faith; the answer is not to hide from the world, but to take our faith out there and live with the tension of Christ's demands.

The third theme of our Lord's prayer has to do with an effective witness. ("As thou hast sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world.") The disciples had found new meaning to their lives because of Jesus Christ. Through him they had experienced the love of God, and from that love they had felt a new unity springing. But here, in his prayer, we discover again that Jesus' intent for them was not that they should simply return to their normal lives and enjoy their new faith. He was sending them into the world, even as God had sent him into the world. He was sending them out to do the same things God had sent him to do. They were to ~~living~~ bring their new unity--their new faith and the good newslthat something new has happened in the world, into eye and ear shot of all men. That is to say; the church does not exist in and of itself. It never did and when it does today it ceases to be the Church of Jesus Christ. It's awfully easy to make this mistake today. It's awfully easy to think of this as our Church

What is the greatest problem facing mankind today? In one form or another we will find ourselves returning to disunity, alienation, divisiveness, if we try to anser that question. And how does this disunity, which is of course, a genralization, express itself specifically? It rears its ugly head in international relations in the form of super-nationalism; in nations that refuse to be responsible for anything but their own immediate welfare. It is currently being expressed in our own nation under the false guise of Patriotism as that Word is interpreted by the radically ~~extreme~~ right wing. "America first" is the battle cry, hysterically intoned by people filled with suspicion, fear and hatred for anybody but Americans. It is expressed in Racism in our country and throughout the world. It is expressed in a latent classism that categorizes people by the size of their income and the organizations they belong to. It is seen clearly in the sinful disunity within the Church itself. It is experienced by anyone who lives in this community for more than a few months and witnesses the absurd spectacle of a town of 4,000 good people constantly embroiled in controversy and dispute, resulting from ~~our~~ an inability to sit down with each other and be reasonable. And finally, disunity is experienced by everyone of us as we confront our neighbor every day, the neighbor we don't like, with whom we don't agree--the neighbor with whom we certainly don't want to spend any time.

These are problems that have always plagued civilization--they are not new. But today they take on a note of immediacy that is peculiar to our generation. We can no longer afford a brash nationalism because one nation could conceivably begin a war to which there would be no end. We can no longer afford a national exclusiveness because the fate of the world is closely intermixed with our fate, whether we like it or not. We can no longer afford racism and personal disunity